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ABSTRACT

This paper supports the idea that teacher preparation programs must create reflective, field-based opportunities that help preservice teachers make connections between educational philosophies and classroom practices. It uses first-hand experiences from one class to introduce the subject matter. The paper discusses the trouble that preservice teachers in this class had in describing their educational philosophies and codes of ethics and explains how their teacher helped them think about and reconsider the issue. The paper then describes traditional educational courses as memory-based and supports the growing trend of using a constructivist approach in teacher preparation programs. Using the constructivist approach, students construct knowledge through an interaction between what they already think and know and new ideas and experiences. Unlike the more traditional memory-based model, this inquiry-based, active-learning approach encourages the formulation of ideas and conclusions and de-emphasizes single interpretations. Helping preservice teachers become reflective practitioners will assist them in making the connection between their philosophies of education and classroom practices. (Contains 14 references.) (SM)

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PHILOSOPHY OF PHILOSOPHY: MAKING THE CONNECTION BETWEEN
PHILOSOPHY AND PEDAGOGY FOR PRESERVICE TEACHERS

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Abstract

This paper supports the idea that teacher preparation programs must create reflective, field-based opportunities that assist preservice teachers in making connections between educational philosophies and classroom practices. The author uses first-hand experiences and a conversational style to introduce readers to the subject matter. The paper describes traditional educational courses as memory-based and supports the growing trend of using a constructivist approach in teacher preparation programs.

(Includes 14 references)

The class ended with a simple overview of the assignment. "Write your existing Philosophy of Education and your Code of Ethics. These are due in two weeks." Panic and confusion erupted in this senior level class of elementary education majors. What did I mean by Philosophy of Education and Code of Ethics, they questioned. After a wonderful, in-depth discussion of the distinction between philosophy and code of ethics, it became apparent that I was speaking some unknown, foreign, symbolic language that brought fear and mistrust to my students. I decided more instruction was needed in this area. For our next class meeting, I prepared a detailed handout that illustrated the idea. "Your Philosophy of Education is 'what you believe' about education and the way children learn. Your Code of Ethics is what you 'do' because of your beliefs. Example: If I believe ----- (philosophy), then I will do ----- (code)." The concept was so simple. These were senior level students. Surely, they could synthesize their knowledge about education, child development, philosophy, and real life experiences to formulate their own beliefs about education. Right? Wrong.

When the papers were collected and read, I was shocked and dismayed to realize that students had no idea what *they* believed about education and how to translate that into classroom practice. As I read, it became apparent that most students were repeating statements they had heard in prior education courses, but had no personal connection to the concepts. I was sure all could have made the coveted 'A' had I asked them to quote a philosopher or memorize Piaget's stages of cognitive development. Samples of their philosophies included: "Learning should be fun. I believe in diversity. Parents should be involved in their child's education. A teacher needs to be flexible." I found their

philosophy statements to be a mix of teaching strategies, vague ideas, and even biographical information. It was later revealed that the biographical information was included because another professor had once asked them to write a paper on why they wanted to teach. The professor had referred to the assignment as the student's personal philosophy of education. The students seemed to have even more difficulty translating their philosophy into a Code of Ethics. This may have been due to the fact that they did not have a clear philosophy from which to transfer.

In just two weeks my students would begin field-based experiences at a local elementary school. I was now on a mission. I needed to teach my students how to formulate their own philosophies and how to translate what they believed about education into classroom practice. That mission, along with the subsequent strategies used to assist preservice teachers in connecting philosophy with pedagogy, is the purpose of this paper.

I began with pen in hand underlining every statement students had written that possibly could be used as a philosophy or code statement. Above each I wrote B (belief) or A (action). Students were told to revise these statements throughout the remainder of the semester based on their reflections of their field-based experiences. The final copy they submitted should be considered a work in progress, as they would be revising their philosophy of education throughout their lives. The thought of not being able to mark off this project from the proverbial 'to do list' caused great anguish for some students. They had become conditioned to respond to short term objectives and rewards. For them, it was almost inconceivable that an assignment could become a lifelong learning situation, even though most had included lifelong learning in their philosophy papers.

Next, I created transparencies with sample philosophy and code statements adapted from the students' writings. As each statement appeared on the screen I asked, "Is this a belief or action?" I included intentionally misleading statements such as, "I believe in cooperative learning" to show that merely inserting the phrase, "I believe" did not create a philosophy. Students had to ask "why" they believed to get to their true philosophy. "Why do you believe in cooperative learning?" Most of the students had indicated they wanted to use cooperative learning techniques in their teaching practices, but did not automatically link this practice to their beliefs of how children learn. One answered, "Because I believe that children learn from each other." "Great." "So, if you *believe* children learn from each other, you will *do* cooperative learning." "So, is cooperative learning a true philosophy or is it something you do in the classroom because of your belief about the way children learn?"

The process was initially slow and tedious. Many students wanted me to simply give them a list of philosophy statements. Instead, I gave them a handout listing some of the prominent philosophies and their major proponents for further study. My experience had led me to my own philosophy of philosophy: education majors are typically willing to accept existing philosophies without challenging or adapting them based on their own experiences and knowledge level. I knew if I provided a list of philosophy statements, these students would "adopt" them as their own. That was what I perceived as part of the problem: adopting ideas without true ownership, acquiring knowledge without the passion or conviction that translates ideas into action.

Prior to joining the university faculty, I served as an elementary principal. I had observed first hand during the interview process that most applicants included trendy, ‘buzz’ words in their philosophy of education. However, when asked about their philosophy, many struggled to convey a true sense of the underlying concepts of their stated beliefs about education. I found that few first year teachers connected their classroom practices to their stated philosophies. I often wondered why college professors did not do a better job preparing preservice teachers. Now, I found myself among the ranks of those I had privately admonished. These experiences led me to a deeper investigation on the teaching of philosophy of education.

Traditional Courses

It is acknowledged that the study of Philosophy of Education is extremely important. Philosophy positively impacts what and how teachers teach (Jacobsen, 1999) and can be viewed as a tool for restructuring our schools (Elias, 1995). The problem is many students are not recognizing the applicability of philosophy in the classroom arena. This may be because of the way educational philosophy has predominately been taught in many teacher preparation programs. Traditional courses have separated philosophy into schools (Soltis, 1981), or “isms” (Jacobsen, 1999). Philosophy has been taught in the *theoretical* realm rather than in a practical sense. Such practices are actually a study of the *history* of the philosophy of education (Elias, 1995) rather than a study of philosophy itself.

Soltis (1981) noted that teaching philosophy merely as a body of knowledge does not engage the student in the process of philosophy. “Doing philosophy” consists of

analyzing, synthesizing, clarifying, arguing, critiquing, and reflecting upon the educational environment and one's own actions. Philosophy should be viewed as a tool educators use to think more critically and rationally about education (Elias, 1995).

Changes in Methodology

An alternative that is gaining popularity among teacher preparation programs is the constructivist approach (MacKinnon & Scarff-Seatter, 1997; Richardson, 1997; Teets & Starnes, 1996). Through this approach, students "construct" knowledge through an interaction between what they already think and know and with new ideas and experiences (Cannella & Reiff, 1994; Richardson, 1997). Unlike the more traditional memory-based model, this inquiry-based, active-learning approach encourages the formulation of ideas and conclusions and de-emphasizes single interpretations. The result is a deeper, more meaningful understanding (Abdal-Haqq, 1998). Because of the greater internalization of ideas, concepts can more readily translated into practice.

Helping preservice teachers become reflective practitioners will assist them in making the connection between their philosophies of education and classroom practices (Kasten & Ferraro, 1995; Kasten, et. al., 1996; Luft, 1999; Telese, 1996). More teacher education programs are expanding field-based opportunities for preservice teachers that include reflective journaling and other forms of self-analysis. These efforts will help teachers evaluate, create, revise, and apply philosophy in the classroom.

Many teacher preparation programs have focused on communicating information. The shift to reflective practice is changing that focus to critical thinking. McKenna (1995) described this change and its potential impact upon traditional education courses.

Conventional wisdom treats communication as the dominant process in educating. Instead...thinking {is} dominant. Communication {has been} regarded as the method for conveying thoughts, skills, and emotions between learners and teachers as well as between learners. Communication... {has not been} the message but the messenger. As the concept of thinking replaces communication in teacher education, methods courses should decline. Teachers will develop their own methods in which appropriate thinking operations and motivating reinforcements will arise from subject matter and learners' capabilities.

Professor I. D. Sedah, (Simpson, 1994) in responding to a letter from a former student who was now in his first year teaching, made this reply: "Isn't it interesting how boring university courses become so relevant after a person has had some practical experience?" Professor Sedah went on to discuss the fact that teacher education programs must do a better job of "integrating university studies with field-based experiences." As teacher preparation programs evolve, so do their students.

With practice, my students became proficient in distinguishing between their belief statements (philosophy) and action statements (code of ethics). Through the use of

a “guided” journal format used in their field-based experiences, they are becoming reflective about their practices and about learner behaviors. The true merit of this exercise will be realized when the students’ classroom practices connect with their stated philosophies about education, both now as preservice teachers and in the future as classroom teachers.

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